FOOTNOTING HISTORY
TEACHING RESOURCES

# UNDERSTANDING PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary sources are the cornerstone of historical research and are heavily used in creating our episodes. This guide will help you introduce primary sources to your students.

**What is a primary source?**

A primary source is something made in a specific time about that specific time, by someone who witnessed or experienced it. It could be a letter, a journal entry, a newspaper article, a painting, a piece of clothing, indigenous oral traditions, notes taken during a science experiment, or something else. (The Library of Congress has a great post that goes more in-depth about this here!)

By contrast, a secondary source is something created by a person who was not present during the events and/or not in the era where the event happened. Podcasts like ours are secondary sources, because we didn't witness the events that we cover. Other common secondary sources are academic journal articles and manuscripts.

Fun fact: Sending a text about your day is creating a primary source--because you are talking about something you directly experienced! Someone reading your texts 100 years from now would view your exchange as a valuable source for understanding the time period in which you sent it.

**Why are primary sources valuable?**

Since it is (sadly) impossible for us to go back in time, primary sources are the closest we can get to experiencing the past directly. When we read secondary sources, we are often reading someone else's interpretation of the sources. If we can look at the primary sources ourselves, we might see things differently or discover something the researchers have not. Also, primary sources help us feel closer to our subjects. They show us what it could feel like to live in a certain time or witness specific events in a way that nothing else can. While primary sources are far from perfect and should always be questioned (see below), without them history would be lost.

**What questions should we ask of primary sources?**

- Who made this source? What do we know about them?
- When was this source made? What was happening in the world at the time?
- Why was this source made? What point was it trying to make?
- Who was its intended audience?
- What are the issues with this source?
- What does this source tell us about the era in which it was created?
- What other sources should be used with it to get the fuller picture?
- When our sources disagree, which ones do we choose to trust?

**How do podcasts use primary sources?**

As professional historians, it is our job to not only study the past but to make sure you feel as close to it as possible. This often means directly discussing and quoting primary sources in our episodes. We do this so that you know how people recorded things in their eras and so that you can experience what it is like to engage with sources when you might not have them in front of you. We also do it so that we can teach you how to engage with primary sources so that when you do encounter them (and we hope you do!) you do so with an understanding of why they are important, how they are used, and why we should both treat them with care and ask questions of them.

**A Selection of Episodes that Highlight Primary Sources**

- After Napoleon: Josephine Divorced
- Anne Neville and the Wars of the Roses
- Cassandra Austen: Jane's Adored Sister
- Choose Your Own Adventure: The Many Accounts of the Execution of Anne Boleyn
- Empress, Strategist... Saint? Irene of Byzantium
- The Forme of Cury
- The Greatest Knight: William Marshal, Part I and The Greatest Knight: William Marshal, Part II
- Jeffrey Hudson: England's Forgotten Swashbuckler
- Maya, Spain, and the Historical Record
- The Milne Family, Part I and The Milne Family, Part II
- Pocahontas
- Tadeusz Kościuszko, Part I: International Icon, Revolutionary Hero and Tadeusz Kościuszko, Part II: Life and Legend
- William and Caroline Herschel, Astronomer Siblings
- 1288: A Moment in Norwich